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A reflective account of undertaking the United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) association application for 'Recognised Practitioner Advisor'

Pete King
Swansea University, UK

Abstract

The decision I took to undertake the United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) Recognised Practitioner Advisor (RPA) provided the opportunity for reflection on how I approach academic mentoring. The process had three outcomes: it showed the variation in academic mentoring between policy, procedure, and both mentors' and mentees' understanding of mentoring, and it enabled me to both develop my own continuing professional development, and more importantly, to support taught Master's students in their academic learning and development. I would encourage anybody in higher education to also consider undertaking the UKAT RPA.

Keywords: UKAT; RPA; reflection; academic mentoring; postgraduate students.

Introduction

Academic mentoring, also referred to as personal tutoring, is a role academic staff in higher education must undertake and forms part of a student's learning and development (Taylor and Neimeyer, 2009; Lunsford et al., 2017). Healy and Welchert define mentoring as 'a reciprocal association between superior and subordinate that effects their mutual transformations' (1990, p.19). Lillian et al. (2008) identified three types of mentoring: youth mentoring, workplace mentoring, and academic mentoring. Having undertaken and completed the Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) and the Senior Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA), both of which have supported my teaching, the opportunity arose for my continuing professional development to complete

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the Recognised Practitioner in Advising (RPA) with The United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) (2020a; 2020b). This was something I was particularly interested in doing as I have had no formal mentoring training within higher education. The lack of formal academic mentoring training within higher education is not uncommon (Bean, Lucas and Hyers, 2014), however, concerning learning and development, as Knippelmeyer and Torraco stated:

> the purpose of higher education is to enhance learning, inquiry, and development for individuals within our society. In such a setting, mentoring, a common method of employee development, would then fit within the scope of enhancing learning, inquiry, and development. (2007, p.1).

Having completed the SFHEA which enabled me to reflect on my teaching practice, the opportunity to undertake the UKAT RPA provided the scope to reflect on my academic mentoring which, in turn, helps contribute to my own continuing professional development and more importantly supports students' learning and development.

The focus on taught Master's students

Having taught both postgraduate and undergraduate students, I was encouraged to focus my RPA application on taught Master's postgraduate students. The rationale for this was based on being a programme director for a Master's course for the last ten years. In addition to reflecting on my own academic mentoring knowledge, skills, and experience I undertook a scoping exercise that involved three aspects:

- Reviewing the published sources on postgraduate academic mentoring.
- Reviewing Swansea University's policies and procedures for academic mentoring.
- Comparing the published sources and the university policies and procedures with both staff and student understanding of academic mentoring.

This enabled a triangulation of my own experience and those of colleagues and the university policies and procedures to be mapped to the UKAT (2019) core values. This for me provided a 'deeper' reflection on the importance of how I undertake academic

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mentoring in line with my own practice and my understanding of other colleagues and of Swansea University's policies and procedures.

Reviewing the published sources

Previous research undertaken with postgraduate taught Master's students includes postgraduate students' perceptions of their supervisors' mentoring skills (Arabaci and Ersözlü, 2010), peer mentoring in Paediatrics (Eisen et al., 2014), peer mentoring between undergraduates and postgraduates (Santos et al., 2022), the efficacy of mentoring for postgraduate Management students (Tripathy and Satapathy, 2020), the mentoring of postgraduate residential doctors in Pakistan (Sheikh, Sheikh and Huynh, 2016), and the cultural differences postgraduate students experience in mentoring when studying Music abroad (Leong, 2010). From these studies, different experiences of postgraduate mentees were identified, including: female mentors having more mentoring skills than male mentors, the age of the mentor, the academic status and title of the mentor, cultural differences in teaching and learning when studying abroad, and students not being sure whether to discuss problems with their mentors. These studies reflect both academic mentoring, as well as relating to professional practice and workplace mentoring.

Reflecting on the published sources, my experience of academic mentoring is a 'one size fits all' approach to academic mentoring in relation to policies and procedures irrespective of the level of study or type of course. Comparing undergraduate and postgraduate students, one similarity is that not all students take up the offer of academic mentoring (although this is often a requirement of their study). Differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students are that most, if not all, undergraduate students are undertaking their first degree course, and many are living away from home for the first time (Lunsford et al., 2017). For postgraduate students, they often juggle home and family life, work, and studying at the same time. Jacobi's (1991) review of undergraduate mentoring considered what factors produce the best fit between protege and mentor. Whilst this was not the specific focus of my UKAT RPA, it did provide me with an opportunity to compare the policies, the procedure, and the application of academic mentoring and align this with the core values of the UKAT (2020b).

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Academic mentoring policies and procedures

I undertook a scoping exercise on the policies and procedures for academic mentoring and how they could be accessed. The guidelines for academic mentoring for Swansea University can be accessed from three sources, two online and one in Word/PDF format, and they apply to both undergraduate and postgraduate mentees. From the three sources around academic mentoring support, there was a lack of consistency between the online and published guidance in several areas. For example, whilst the Academic Mentoring Guidelines state it is 'compulsory', the online guidance on the academic mentors' webpage states 'You should meet', 'Make the time to attend', or 'Try to attend if you can'. From the variation it can be inferred that academic mentoring meetings are voluntary, rather than compulsory.

Academic staff and taught postgraduate student surveys

Undertaking the RPA included two online surveys, one for academic staff who mentor postgraduate students and one for the students. Both surveys obtained Faculty approval at Swansea University. The questions for both surveys were developed using the UKAT (2019) 'Professional framework for advising and tutoring' which provides the underpinning knowledge, skills, and understanding based on four core components: Conceptual (ideas and theories), Informational (knowledge possessed), Relational (skills needed to convey formation and concepts), and Professional (commitment to mentoring). In addition, the surveys included Swansea University academic mentors' five topic areas of: Reviewing Progress, Accessing Academic and Personal Support, Understanding the Exam and Assessment System, Academic References for Placements or Job Applications, and Answering Other Queries or Signposting.

Variation in academic mentoring

The survey identified variation in the training provided for staff for academic mentoring. This was reflected by Eby et al. who stated: 'Moreover, mentors within the academic context may be better equipped to provide the functions associated with mentoring as it often part of their job training' (2008, p.264). Whilst it may be part of the job, the type of

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training was more informal, from colleagues or the department, rather than any compulsory formal training, and was more aligned with youth mentoring which is defined as 'serv[ing] as informal mentors within the workplace setting [and doing] so on a volunteer basis with little or no training' (Eby et al., 2008, p.264). Race stated the need for 'guidance and training for personal tutors on the role should be formalized', which at present does not appear to be the case as often support is from peers, or at departmental level (2010).

Although I have had no formal mentoring training, I do bring in my experience, knowledge and related qualifications as a practitioner who has line-manged individuals and teams. I found using basic counselling skills to be invaluable when undertaking academic mentoring to support students. Whilst academic mentors are generally not counsellors, the use of counselling skills, particularly those developed by Rogers (1990) in person-centred counselling can be applied in non-counselling contexts, such as supervision and mentoring. For example, the survey indicated that both staff and students expected that mentors had listening skills, are open, and that clear boundaries and expectations are stated. Being open and having listening skills are key counselling skills. My reflection, and training in mentoring reflects the distinction between counselling and using counselling skills. The variation in approach and different theoretical models that are used reflect the lack of training staff experience when undertaking academic mentoring as part of their role supporting postgraduate taught Master's students.

There was a variation in the guidance relating to attending academic mentoring on the university website which was the main source of information for students. Reflecting on my own mentoring practice, I have experienced a continuum of not seeing my postgraduate academic mentees for a whole academic term, to others who have some form of mentoring contact on a weekly basis (for example during drop-in sessions). Maybe, for postgraduate students there is more of an 'option' to choose when they want to meet, rather than a prescribed number of meetings (which was not consistently known by staff or students). This takes into account the best fit between academic mentors and mentees (Jacobi, 1991) and not having a 'one size fits all' for all types of students.

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Final reflections

The first reflection of undertaking the UKAT RPA mentoring course is gauging my own understanding and practice of mentoring. I start with Eby et al. (2008) who identified three types of mentoring: youth mentoring, workplace mentoring, and academic mentoring. I have undertaken both workplace mentoring and academic mentoring and I can reflect on both the similarities and differences between the two. The similarities include setting an environment where the mentee feels comfortable: this includes how you position the chairs within the office to promote a dialogue. My second reflection, from reading the literature, is the consideration of how academic mentoring is defined. Starr offers a concise definition of mentoring where 'mentoring can often be defined by the nature and intention of a relationship' (2014, p.4) whilst Healy and Welchert define mentoring as 'a reciprocal association between superior and subordinate that effects their mutual transformations' (1990, p.19). Schunk and Mullen consider that the 'overall goal of mentoring is to help people function effectively and achieve success in their professional and personal lives', and that includes behaviours of modelling, coaching, and counselling (2013, p.362).

From my current experience of mentoring, the 'reciprocal relationship' and 'intention of a relationship' is more in the control of the mentor, and to a lesser extent the mentee, whilst the overall goal of 'achiev[ing] success in their professional and personal lives' is more that of organisational policies and procedures. When reflecting on the four core competencies which make up the UKAT framework (conceptual, informational, professional, and relational), I can reflect on how I currently engage in academic mentoring. When considering the core competency of 'conceptual', my theoretical underpinning is based on the 'Introduction to Counselling Skills course' I undertook in 2012. The 'Introduction to Counselling Course' focused on the person-centred approach of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard (Egan, 1975) using active listening skills of attention-giving, observing, listening, and responding (Pattison, Robson and Beynon, 2014). The person-centred approach and the need for a 'holding space' are two key aspects on Clay et al.'s (2023) development of a coaching and mentoring framework. I have applied these skills to my role as an academic mentor, although I have had no mentoring training in the university.

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The role of academic mentoring to support students' learning and development is a role that both new and experienced academics in higher education have as part of their job. Knippelmeyer and Torraco stated that academic mentoring fits within the scope of 'enhancing learning, inquiry, and development' (2007, p.1) and undertaking the UKAT RPA has enabled me to reflect on how I undertake academic mentoring. I was awarded the UKAT Recognised Practitioner Advisor this year. I have found this process to be a beneficial experience that has contributed to my continuing professional development in an area where there is a lack of training for academic staff. More importantly, it can support students' learning and development as they embark on the MA programme I currently direct. The UKAT RPA is a welcome addition to my SFHEA, and both contribute to support students' learning and development. The outcome of this process has enhanced both my knowledge and practice of academic mentoring and I would strongly recommend others to undertake the UKAT Recognised Practitioner Advisor as part of their continuing professional development. The overall message for anybody involved in academic mentoring in higher education is: if you have the opportunity to take part in the UKAT RPA, I strongly advise and recommend you do so.

Acknowledgments

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Author details

Pete King is a senior lecturer and the programme director for the MA Developmental and
Therapeutic Play course at Swansea University. Pete has been published in both home
and international journals in the areas of play, playwork, playwork and Covid-19 and
teaching research using playfulness. Pete has co-edited three books with Shelly Newstead
and co-authored one book with the late Gordon Sturrock. Pete is a Senior Fellow with the
HEA and now a Recognised Practitioner Advisor with UKAT.

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